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POP MUSIC

The Preservation Hall Jazz Band takes New Orleans music on the road.

Preservation Hall keeps turn-of-century jazz fresh

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ
of The Gazette

When you ask 82-year-old 'Kid' Thomas Valentine when he joined the Preservation Hall Jazz Band, he barks out over the phone, "Hey, dat ain't no Preservation Band, dat's my band!"

The man who learned to play the trumpet at the age of 14 — "from just a bunch of old boys in the country" — and arrived in New Orleans in 1922, only joined the band that's world renowned for preserving turn-of-the-century New Orleans music a dozen years ago.

"Listen, I would rather play music than work, but I always worked. I painted houses, worked in the railroad shop, did every kind of job. I worked during the daytime and played at night.

"Played in the clubs, at dances, played on the docks of the harbor," he says in a crusty New Orleans brogue. "I used to play at funerals and parades. Back then, there were all kinds of places to play in New Orleans.

"These days, it's just mainly the tourists who wanna hear it.

"The New Orleans people today would rather listen to all dat noise comin' out of the radio.

Thus, the Preservation Hall Jazz Band takes New Orleans music on the road, travelling by bus to play the concert circuit, such as Salle Wilfrid Pelletier on Monday night.

The music that moved up the Mississippi river after World War I, to influence what became known as swing, bebop and even rock 'n' roll, is alive as long as the old hands that played it then are still around. It took a former systems analyst, Allan Jaffe, to convert a New Orleans art gallery into Preservation Hall, a place where the old masters could swing. It's home base for the clutch of elderly gentlemen who tour the world with music that is pure Americana. Jaffe, who plays the sousaphone (a tuba used to carve out the music's immutably strident rhythms) is the youngest of the group at 44.

Only one member of the band, 67-year-old saxophonist Manuel Ball, used to play with Valentine in "my original band."

"I learned by myself, jus' picked it up one day," says 'Kid' Valentine. "There was always music where I lived — my father was in a brass band. I started playing on the banks of the Mississippi for the boats that were passing by."

Valentine says he prefers flying to Europe than the sitting on the bus that takes the elders of American music to their concerts. "I can't get any rest on a bus, although most of the other boys are able to sleep. I don't do much talkin', no gamblin' and no boozin'. I just sit there and wait to get on stage."

Scales 'brick wall'

Czech singer delights Quebec

Czechoslovakia's top female pop singer, Helena Vondrackova, was filled with apprehension — despite having played everywhere from France to Japan — when she made her first concert stage appearance in Quebec City this week.

"With a lot of foreign singers visiting America," she said, sipping wine at the Four Seasons hotel between visiting record companies and boutiques, "no matter how well they perform, there's a brick wall between the audience and the singer. After the first song at the Grand Theatre in Quebec I decided to talk to the people, a little bit in French, Czech and English. It worked — I had them in the palm of the hands."

But then, working an audience is nothing new to Helena, who has been in showbusiness half of her 32 years, in which she's issued eight albums and 100 singles. She was in Quebec courtesy of Czechoslovak Airlines, accompanied by an agent from Pragokoncert, the government agency that coordinates foreign artistic exchanges.

HELENA VONDRACKOVA Likes Barbra Streisand

Standing ovation

Wearing tight corduroy pants and knee high boots and a blouson top, her wavy bleached blonde hair pulled back, Vondrackova was scouting around for a record company to distribute her records. Her Quebec City standing ovation — the daily Le Soleil raved, "Helena, la nouvelle etoile des Quebecois" — put her in good stead for a return trip in October. When she may play at Place des Arts. For now, though, she left the record companies with armfuls of American discs, which she studies religiously.

"I plan to do one of Billy Joel's songs from '52nd Street' in German," she bubbled.

"The American influence is felt in Czechoslovakia, just like any country. After Russian, students have the choice of English, French and Germany to learn. Many of them choose English. Our own composers would like to follow their own style, but they have to commercialize because that's what the people like. I like all styles, especially Barbra Streisand, Leo Sayer and Burt Bacharach.

"And, of course, the Bee Gees. I like disco music, not listening to it for a whole, but it's great for dancing. We have disco music at home — one disco in Prague."

Vondrakova's ascendency in the Czech star system was rapid. After studying piano for 10 years she made the decision to go into pop music. "My father wanted me to pursue classical studies, but to have a career in classical music you either have to be very good or not-so-good and wind up teaching children. I wasn't interested in that at all."

So, like American hopefuls looking for a break, she entered a 'We Are Looking for New Singers" competition in 1964 and was rewarded with a job in a Prague theatre. Her first record, *Red River*, shot up to the top of the charts. A year later, she was voted the most popular Czech singer, winning the coveted 'Golden Nightingale' award.

Since then, she's performed at major European and South American song festivals, a month at the Olympia in Paris, and appeared in numerous television programs. She managed an international recording deal. "But the company was not good for me in that they had too many big stars and did not have time for me."

She lives the good life in Czechoslovakia. She owns three cars, one of which stays at her parents' home in the town of Slatinany, 100 km. from Prague where she keeps an apartment. She glowingly describes her parent's farm — beside a river, near a castle, with horses and an "English garden" — as a place to find refuge after she's performed her 15 mandatory shows in the socialist bloc per month ("I have to keep my six-piece band working").

Punk ignored

She says that punk styles haven't caught on in her homeland — "there is more control in our system" — but "our people are more similar to Canadians than you think." She goes to the cinema a lot and enjoys such American disaster epics as *Towering Inferno* and *Earthquake*.

American or British rock groups performing in Czechoslovakia is a rarity, she says, but "many black American jazz musicians do big concerts there."

After buying a burgundy velvet stage dress on Crescent street and visiting some Old Montreal discos, Helena Vondrackova leaves Montreal with a pledge to return.

— Juan Rodriguez

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